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ASCERTAINING INSTRUCTIONAL LEVELS.

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A RATIONALE FOR FITTING BOOKS TO THE PUPIL BASED ON BOTH PSYCHOLOGICAL AND LINGUISTIC EVIDENCE IS PRESENTED. THE GOAL OF PLACING STUDENTS ON THEIR PROPER INSTRUCTIONAL LEVEL IS NOT ACHIEVED GENERALLY IN A SCHOOL UNLESS IT IS MADE A MATTER OF POLICY AND IMPLEMENTED IN WELL-DEFINED WAYS. THREE SCHOOL-WIDE PROCEDURES CONCERNED WITH DETERMINING INSTRUCTIONAL LEVELS ARE CONSIDERED--THE INFORMAL TEACHER APPRAISAL, CHECKOUT PROCEDURES, AND READING INVENTORIES AND PLACEMENT TESTS. TEACHER APPRAISAL IN EVERY SUBJECT AND IN EVERY GRADE IS THE IDEAL APPROACH TO THE CONTINUOUS PROBLEM OF DETERMINING INSTRUCTIONAL LEVELS. IN THE CHECKOUT PROCEDURE, A READING SPECIALIST WORKING WITH THE TEACHER OR PRINCIPAL SHARES THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ADVANCING PUPILS FROM ONE LEVEL TO ANOTHER BY LISTENING TO THE CHILD READ ORALLY AND THEN CHECKING HIS COMPREHENSION IN A VARIETY OF WAYS. READING INVENTORIES SHOULD BE REGARDED AS STARTING POINTS. SEVEN REFERENCES ARE GIVEN. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL READING ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE (SEATTLE, MAY 4-6, 1967). (RH)

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ASCERTAINING INSTRUCTIONAL LEVELS*

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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Are these truths self-evident?

1. Each pupil is unique and his reading program must be tailored to this uniqueness.
2. The reading program includes library books, readers, subject matter textbooks, and newspapers.
3. If so, it follows then that each pupil must be reading materials in which he is fluent in oral reading and in which his comprehension of vocabulary, details, and main ideas is very high.

Interestingly enough, we find many teachers and supervisors and school systems who affirm these ideas in written and oral statements of beliefs but whose programs do not reflect such verbal affirmations. For example, in these same schools we find pupils whose oral reading can be characterized as dysfluent and whose comprehension is fuzzy or worse in one or more of the reading-media forms mentioned above. In too many instances such crippling performance is evident in all reading media. It is also true at the other extreme that pupils may be using materials which offer no challenge. Either extreme illustrates how a school, in practice, tries to fit the pupil to a nonfitting book rather than fitting the book to the pupil.

Our rationale for fitting books to the pupil is based on both psychological and linguistic evidence. From a psychological point of view we have evidence

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*Presented at the International Reading Association Convention, May 1967, at Seattle, Washington.

that the most efficient learning takes place where pupils are highly motivated, where their self esteem is enhanced and where they have rather full comprehension of what they are doing. For those who are overplaced in reading, such lack of success leads to discouragement, loss of dignity or ego support, withdrawal and often to hostility. At the opposite extreme, to the underplaced the lack of challenge offers inadequate opportunity for involvement and the effect is to dampen the enthusiasm of these able pupils.

From a linguistic point of view we know that pupils who are dysfluent will find it difficult tc make the proper connection between the melodies of oral language and the incomplete representation of these language structures in writing. Some of the fundamental meaning in language, as we know from our studies in linguistics, is expressed through the intonational structures of stress, pitch and juncture. If we encumber the poor reader with written material which he cannot decode easily from the point of view of word recognition and attack, how can we expect him to provide for himself these missing intonational features?

Given this psychological and linguistic rationale as the basis for matching pupils with readable books, we need to adopt or invent procedures in every subject. It has been my experience that this goal will not be achieved generally in a school unless it is spelled out as a matter of policy and implemented in well defined ways.

In general these procedures are all variations of the informal reading inventory which usually defines the limits of three reading levels for each pupil as summarized in the following chart:

LEVELS	Performance in Context	
	ORAL FLUENCY	SILENT COMPREHENSION
Independent	99-100%	95 to 100%
Instructional	95-98%	75 to 94%
Frustration or Overplacement	less than 95%	less than 75%

Some significant schoolwide procedures which are concerned with ascertaining and placing pupils at their instructional levels are:

(1) Informal teacher appraisal

(2) Check out procedures

(3) The Informal Reading Inventory and placement tests

(1) Informal teacher appraisal

There is no doubt in my mind that informal teacher appraisal in every subject and in every grade is the ideal approach to the continuous problem of ascertaining instructional levels. Every time a pupil reads aloud and answers a question or completes an activity sheet independently the teacher can determine whether the criteria indicated in the chart above are being met. If not, the sensitive teacher can immediately provide such needed help in overcoming the problems leading to lack of fluency, inadequate comprehension or both as the following:

a. the use of an easier book in a series

b. more preparation before the pupil is asked to work independently

c. the substitution of easy wide reading experiences for a time

d. the substitution of other more appropriate media for the frustrating book

(2) Check-out procedures

Many of the school systems I have served have instituted check-out procedures by which reading specialists, helping or master teachers or principals share the responsibility with the teacher of advancing pupils from one level to another when they have "mastered" a book in a structured series according to the IRI criteria charted earlier.

Sometimes this check-out is done in the classroom; sometimes in the principal's office. Sometimes the teacher and class listen in as each pupil reads; sometimes the pupil reads only to the collaborating specialist. To check oral reading fluency the pupil may be asked to re-read familiar stories in the back of his "completed" reader; sometimes he may read orally at sight in the next reader.

As a check on extent of comprehension, nothing seems to us a more valid criterion or more reliable a measure than the average performance of a pupil on the pages of the workbook he has completed <u>independently</u>. Additional comprehension checks may be obtained by asking the pupil questions about stories he has just read or by asking him to summarize briefly the most important ideas or events in a paragraph, a page or a story.

I use a variation of this check-out procedure as a basic element in evaluations and surveys I have conducted for schools. These schools are asked to keep a record of the percentage of accuracy of each pupil on five pages of the reading workbook he is using and to record the percentage of accuracy of the oral sight reading of each pupil on 100 running words in the next story in his reader.

Those pupils who don't get a score of at least 75% in average comprehension <u>and</u> at least 95% in oral reading are regarded as probably overplaced. In some

schools, particularly in so-called culturally disadvantaged areas, I have found instances in which almost every pupil in some classes are overplaced in basal readers and in textbooks in the subject areas.

READING FLUENCY AND COMPREHENSION SURVEY

Directions:
1. Under Oral Reading Fluency record the per cent of words in 100 running words in a new story which the pupils read correctly. Errors are words which pupils mispronounce, refuse to pronounce within five seconds, omit, or insert.
2. Under Comprehension record the per cent of accuracy on each of five successive pages in the pupil's workbook which he has completed independently.

Pupil	Per Cent of Oral Reading Fluency	Per Cent of Comprehension					
		1	2	3	4	5	Average

A simple and useful variation of the check-out which I recommend to parents and librarians is this: after a pupil has chosen a book from the library or for purchase he should be given the "five finger" check. You do this by marking off or noting a 100 word sequence of words that looks typical of the book and have the pupil read it aloud at sight. If you count more than five errors the book is very probably too difficult and the child should be guided to more appropriate books.

(3) Reading Inventories

Anyone may develop reading inventories by using pages from structured or scaled reading materials as described in many sources. (1, 2, 4, 5) Others

may be obtained from reading clinics and some publishers. (3, 7) Reading inventories vary in length, comprehensiveness and practicality for the classroom teacher. All, however, provide an estimate of the instructional levels of pupils. Our own Botel Reading Inventory (3) was developed with the classroom teacher in mind -- a measure easy to administer and interpret, and considerate of the time pressures of the teacher of 25 or more pupils.

In any event, and this is most important: We must regard the results on these reading inventories as starting points. Nothing can take the place of the continuous informal teacher appraisal after the first estimate has been made by the use of the reading inventory. Only if we follow this procedure are we assured high validity and reliability of our appraisals. Continuous appraisal provides the most meaningful validity in that it is based directly upon the materials and methods we are using and provides high reliability in that our pace and even our level can be modified if a pattern of unsatisfactory fluency or comprehension develops.

The significance which we have come to attach to ascertaining instructional levels and to effective placement of pupils using such methods as described in this paper is probably best expressed by the fact that we believe the eleventh commandment is:

Thou shalt not overplace pupils.

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